

The Development and Consolidation of the Village Unit in Gozo after 1575

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A new Gozo began to take shape in the last quarter of the sixteenth century. By the year 1575, the island had recovered to quite an extent from the cataclysmic Great Siege of 1551. The population of the island which from around 6000 before the Siege had fallen to a few hundred in the following decade, was climbing steadily and was then close to 2300. Agricultural activity was thriving again and commerce made a slow recovery, with the result that the economy began heading towards a revival.

THE RENAISSANCE IN THE LATE SIXTEENTH CENTURY

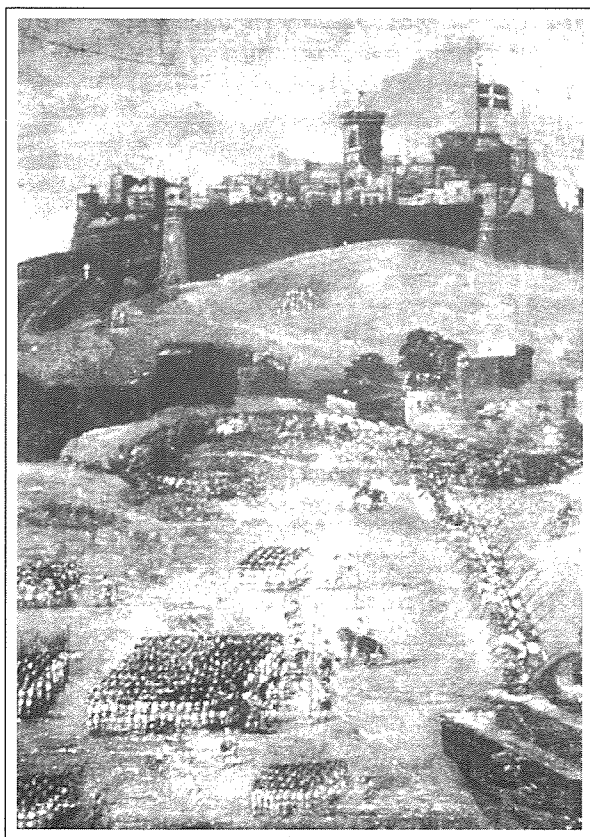
The island's administration was in the hands of the *Universitas Gaudisii*, the municipal Town Council of Gozo, which was answerable to the *Governatore di Gozzo*. The Governor, whose post was established in 1550, became responsible for the supervision of the island's administration replacing the *sindicaturi* that during the Aragonese rule were sent over for this purpose from Palermo. As early as June 1530, only weeks after Malta and Gozo had been handed over to the Order of the Knights of Saint John of Jerusalem, the *Universitas* had sought the confirmation of its rights and privileges from the Grand Master and insisted that they be placed under his special care (NLM: *Bibl* 670, 39r-42r; Valentino 1935: 170-227). On 18 July, Phillippe Villiers de l'Isle Adam, the first Grand Master, did in fact meet some of their demands, and his successor, Juan de Homedes, eventually created the post of Governor to represent him on the island (Agius De Soldanis 1746: 312-313).

The day to day running of the administration remained, as before, in the hands of the town council made up of two, three, or four *giurati* or aldermen assisted by several officials. In 1560 the *Universitas Gaudisii*

was made up of nine (NAG 1/1: 10r). Besides the Governor, there were two jurats, a treasurer, two *Cattapani*, two *Giudici idioty*, and a *Maestro di Piazza*. The jurats were also chosen by the Grand Master and their term of office commenced on 1 September and more often than not they were replaced every year. One of them was a trained lawyer or notary who acted as town judge with jurisdiction in both civil and criminal cases. He stood for the Governor during his absence from the island. The jurats had a host of responsibilities: two of the most vital being the restoration of the fortifications and the provision of grain. The treasurer was responsible for income and expenditure. Income was raised from exercise duty and from taxes levied for keeping shops and other establishments. A lion's share of the expenditure was employed in the upkeep of the fortifications. The *Cattapani* were responsible for the market and the hygiene of the town. They were to check the use of correct weights and measures and to enforce the prices of objects established quadrimestrally by the town officials. The couple of *Giudici idioty*, "ignorant of the law", delivered judgement in petty offences. The *Maestro di Piazza*, short for *Piazza d'armi*, was the man responsible for the organization of the *dejma* or local militia and for its rapid deployment in case of an enemy landing.

By 1575, life on Gozo had reached the pre-1551 tempo. This is clearly discernible from the earliest extant registers of the *Acta et Negotiorum Universitatis Gaudisii*. Since the 1551 holocaust, the people had in their majority still taken up residence within the *Castello* or *l-Imdina* (NAV: R271/1, 84v) as the medieval fortified Citadel was earlier known, and in its *Borgo* or suburb, Rabat.

The rising population necessitated the importation of more and more grain, bread being the staple food of the people. This was imported directly from abroad by the *Universitas*. It was usually bought through an agent in Licata, Sicily (NAG 1/2: 435v) and from there shipped to the port of Marsalforn. It was stored in granaries within the Citadel (NAG 1/2: 436v). In 1593 the agent was a certain Commendatore Puccini and the shipment was in the hands of Matteo Cotugno and Matteo Cassaro (NAG 1/2: 435r-v). The next most commonly imported item was wine. The import license was given to the bidder who offered the highest percentage of excise duty (NAG 1/2: 64r). The Gozitans were refined wine-drinkers, because duty on the imported product provided a high percentage of income to the administration (NAG 1/2: 446r).



The new Citadel of Gozo
in a painting of 1622 at
Savina Church, Rabat.
Photo: Joseph Bezzina

An indicator of rising standards is the greater attention given by the officials for the upkeep of cleanliness at the market and in the streets of the Citadel. One *Bando* after another were promulgated to achieve that end and trespassers were being fined (NAG 1/2: 44v). As from 1593, fowl could no longer be left roaming in the streets of the Citadel (NAG 1/2: 432v).

Education was also being given due attention. There were two schools in Gozo: one was a public school under the responsibility of the *Universitas*; the second was run by the *Matrice* church and was tailored for clerics who wanted to proceed to the priesthood. The first recorded school-master of

the former is the Augustinian Fra Marco Gandolfo, engaged since 1 December 1573 (NAG 1/2: 81v). A Dominican cleric Batholomeo Chaber was in the early 1590s master at the latter, and from September 1591 he was also running the school for the *Universitas*. (NAG 1/2: 438r-v). Problems regarding wages led more than once to the closure of one or both. Chaber had to protest over his low insufficient salary more than once (NAG 1/2: 435v; NAG 1/2: 530r), but he held his teaching post for over fifty years (NAG1/4: 1636-37, 16r). He must have died in office, for his last salary up to 14 June 1642 had to be paid to his heirs. (NAG1/4: 1641-42, 27v). Civil and ecclesiastical authorities did try to offer some form of education to the Gozitan youth, but financial problems were hindering progress in this field.

A pointer towards normality is the fact that the people were again enjoying organized entertainment, the chief attractions being the horse races on the feast of Santa Marija and carnival. Some form of celebration related to carnival is recorded as early as February 1593 (NAG 1/2: 437v). The horse races had long been established. In 1587, the *Universitas* increased the prizes and laid down that horses brought over from Malta for the races were henceforth to be kept in Gozo for use by the militia in emergencies (NAG 1/2: 67r).

THE DEFENCES AND SETTLEMENT PATTERNS

The defence of Gozo was a perpetual problem for the Knights. Apart from the Great Siege of 1551, there were several other minor attacks up to 1599 (Agius de Soldanis 1746: 319-330). The Gozitan countryside, especially, was easily susceptible to the Turks and other marauding Mediterranean pirates and as a result the main settlement remained the Citadel and its suburb of Rabat. This sense of insecurity also explains why there was still no *rahal* place-name in Gozo, in comparison with at least one hundred in Malta (Wettinger 1990: 59).

The old Citadel, into which the Gozitans could retire when raiding corsairs approached, was not up to contemporary standards and its walls could not withstand artillery bombardment. Yet the Knights were rather reluctant to modernize the town. The *Castello* was land-locked and unlikely to receive any reinforcement or reprovisioning in the face of a

long siege. The idea of abandoning the old Citadel was frequently canvassed along with proposals to build a coastal fortified town. Yet the idea never materialized. On the one hand the Knights lacked money for Gozo as the defence of the island was not amongst their initial priorities; on the other hand the general feeling was against the removal of the town from the very centre of the island.

Finally in 1599, the Order secured the services of the military engineer Giovanni Rinaldini of Ancona to prepare a report on Gozo's defence problems. He practically ruled out the restoration of the old Citadel, but the Knights rejected his advice and decided to fortify the old *Castello* (Dal Pozzo, 1703: 426). Works commenced towards the end of 1599 (AOM:100, 193v) and proceeded up to 1623 (Agius de Soldanis 1746: 132; Spiteri, 1994: 317-331). The lower South enceinte, the part overlooking Rabat, was provided with a main front of gunpowder fortifications, which are very impressive and surprisingly powerful for such a small Citadel. It is unknown how much of Rinaldini's suggestions were employed in this rebuilding, as his plans have not been traced.

Contemporaneously the Knights began tackling the coastal fortifications of the island. The first to be defended, reasonably enough, were the two principal ports of Gozo: Mgarr and Marsalforn. In 1605, after a bequest by Grand Master Martin Garzes (Hoppen 1979: 123) a tower was raised above Mgarr, the harbour employed for communications with Malta. Garzes tower was the first in a series that was to render the island much safer. A second tower was raised in 1616 above the port of Marsalforn (Sammut Tagliaferro 1993: 111), then Gozo's lifeline to Licata, Sicily, and the world. The Gozo-Malta channel was rendered still more safe for commerce in 1618 when Grand Master Alof de Wignacourt financed the construction of Santa Marija Tower on Comino (Hoppen 1979:123). More towers were raised at Xlendi in 1650, at Dwejra in 1652, at Mgarr ix-Xini in 1661, and *Torre Nuova* off Dahlet Qorrot, Nadur, in 1667 (Hoppen 1979:123).

The raising of these towers was to change the land-settlement pattern of Gozo for good. The gradual mastering of the coast rendered the Gozitan countryside more secure, and the constant threat from sea corsairs was becoming a thing of the past. People began radiating out from the Citadel and Rabat in all directions, to settle permanently in the countryside

where they had their fields and farms. These settlements were to develop into hamlets and villages and eventually into small country towns.

A SCATTER OF SETTLEMENTS

The continuous threat of corsairs in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries had convinced the authorities to issue a *Bando* obliging the people of Gozo to retire within the Citadel for the night. Prevention, it was found out at a price, is better than cure. The redemption of slaves was not only a costly and lengthy process but the majority of victims succumbed to the harshness of slavery and never made it back (Wettinger 1977: 427-430). No wonder that those who owned a house or a room within the Citadel were considered among the fortunate of Gozo!

This *Bando* applied from 1 May to 31 October, during which time the calm Mediterranean waters were literally infested with pirates originating from ports throughout its littoral. The windy wintry months prevented long distant shipping and hence from November to April the people lived in tranquillity in small single or double roomed country houses close to their fields and farms in a wide scatter of settlements that dotted the whole island.

As the farms could not be left unguarded throughout the whole night, late in the sixteenth century grown-up males were relieved of the obligation to retire within the Citadel. Females and children were however still obliged to sleep in safety and it is certain that several had to share a single room with other families as sleeping quarters. The separation of males and females at night created a host of problems and innumerable litigations and a good number of females were being exempted and permitted to sleep in the countryside with their husbands against the payment of four or five *Scudi* annually (Agius De Soldanis 1746: 141-143).

This *Bando* had definitely slowed down all development removed from the centre of the island and the mitigation of regulations immediately led to a sharp rise in the number of countryside settlements. One thus notices an immediate increase in the practice of husbandry which could not be carried out within the Citadel and the confines of old Rabat. The

regular price lists published by the town Council points to a most varied production of meat and thus a considerable number of farms. The first extant list of 1565 lists over twenty different kinds of meat (NAG1/1, 12r), and seventeen varieties are listed in 1593 (NAG 1/2: 433r-v). Production of the still typical local cheeselets (NAG 1/2: 437r), both fresh and peppered – *gbejniet* and *gobon tal-bżar* – meant that people were also keeping sheep. There was also a considerable production of fruit, vegetables and other products (NAG 1/2: 432r).

Another clear sign of settlements outside Rabat is the number of countryside chapels. In the survey carried out by the Apostolic Visitor Pietro Dusina in 1575, fifty churches and chapels are listed. Of these six were within the Citadel, ten in Rabat, and thirty four in the countryside (AEGVA , 1575:192-203, 265-273). Their quality was uneven but the simple fact that they were standing points to a caring community in their proximity. It is interesting to note that a general rehabilitation of the chapels was taking place by the turn of the century. This is perceptible from the pastoral visits prior to 1598 and those in the following decades. Two suffice as an example. The Assumption chapel perched on *ta' Dbiegi* hill, Gozo's highest point, was not only in an optimum condition but was also one of the very few in Gozo with a bell on its roof (AEGVP, 1615: 26r). The second is another Assumption chapel at *tal-Hamrija*, Xewkija, which had been in a mediocre condition until about 1610 (AEGVP, 1608: 13v). It was then restored in a most excellent manner on the initiative and at the expense of Eugenio Romirez Maldonato, Governor of Gozo. In 1615, the bishop noted that mass was celebrated in this chapel every Sunday (AEGVP, 1615:43r).

This is one of the earliest references to the celebration of a regular weekly mass in a countryside chapel and the fact is thus very significant. It is first of all an undeniable proof of a resident population in the vicinity. It is also an indication that several of the country settlements had begun to gather a certain consistency and that the first villages had started to take shape. That this is related to a Xewkija chapel is no coincidence.

The people's mind had been partly put to peace by the increasing surveillance of the coastal areas and so they had decided to settle further away from the centre. This gave them a double advantage: they were closer to their farms and fields and they could enjoy better housing. The

fact that by that time people were expecting a better living space and a healthier environment transpires from more than one enactment of the town Council (NAG 1/1: 44v.61r;1/2: 432r).

The population had by the fourth decade of the seventeenth century increased to just under 3000 (Balaguer 1645: ASV, Malta, 186: 406r). The *Bando* obliging people to sleep within the Citadel was hardly being enforced and observed any longer, and it was repealed on 18 April 1637 (Agius De Soldanis 1746: 142). At that time the first Gozitan villages had already taken shape.

THE CENSUS OF 1667

This is clear from a hitherto hardly analysed detailed census of Gozo of 1667, discovered by the present author some years back. The census had been requested by the Inquisitor in an inquiry related to the establishment of the Gozo Collegiate Church (AEG Capitula: 49r-85r).¹ It was compiled in early 1667 by the heads of the two parishes of Gozo at that time: Don Giovanni Antonio Cammilleri, Archpriest of the *Matrice* Church of *Santa Marija*, and Dun Marianus Puglisi, the parish priest of Saint George. The census, concluded on 16 June 1667 (AEG Capitula: 75v.77r) is very reliable, as it was based on a door to door survey. It gives a clear picture on the development of the settlements in Gozo prior to the establishment of the first village parishes.

People are divided under the aforementioned two parishes of Gozo. The people of the *Matrice* are recorded according to residence; while those of Saint George appear alphabetically under the Christian name of the head of the household. The parishioners of Saint George included those people living in the old suburb of Rabat; all the rest were part of the *Matrice*, that is, those living within the Citadel, on the outskirts of Rabat, in the countryside, and on the island of Comino. The *Santa Marija* parishioners are grouped under the developing district or *contrada* and, in two cases, there is a sub-grouping of scattered settlements under two such districts. There was still no *casale* or *rahal* proper; it was common practice at the time that a *contrada* be elevated to the status of a *casale* or *rahal* when it was established as a parish.

1. The Census was discovered by the present author and first published in an extensive study on the village of Sannat (see Bezzina, 1989: 112-116).

Table 1.
Full list with the Number of Persons and Households

	Persons	Households
<i>Castello</i> (Cittadella)	358	106
<i>Madonna delle Grazie</i> / <i>la Belleha</i>	79	16
<i>Rabbato</i> (Rabat)	158	46
<i>Xeuchia</i> (Xewkija)	403	90
<i>Ta' Sannat</i>	173	38
<i>Monsciar</i> (Munxar)	51	14
<i>Xilendi</i> (Xlendi)	08	01
<i>Fontana grande</i> (Fontana)	61	14
<i>Santa Chatarina</i> (plus following:)	257	68
<i>Dueira</i> (Dwejra)		
<i>Hajjn Abdun</i> (Ghajjn Ghabdun)		
<i>Gar Ilma</i> (Ghar Ilma)		
<i>Ta' Chircem</i> (ta' Kercem)		
<i>Ta' Ciagi sive Dibegi maestrale</i>	53	10
<i>Garbo</i> (Gharb)	324	73
<i>Hasri</i> (Ghasri) (plus following:)	280	64
<i>Zebbug</i> (Żebbuġ)		
<i>Vet Sara</i> (Wied Sara)	92	28
<i>Marsalfurno</i> (Marsalforn)	55	11
<i>Sciahret il Hazzenin</i> (Xaghra)	289	63
<i>Nadur</i>	178	37
<i>La Cala</i> (Qala)	65	14
<i>Mugiarro</i> (Mġarr)	57	14
<i>Comino</i>	27	08
 <i>Matrice</i> (total)	 2968	 715
<i>Saint George</i>	1200	398
 <i>Gozo</i>	 4141	 1105
<i>Comino</i>	27	08
Total	4168	1113

Source: AEG, Census (1667), compiled by Joe Muscat — Nadur

Excepting the Citadel and old Rabat, the census lists twenty two settlements on Gozo and another on the island of Comino. Two of the settlements were the outskirts of Rabat and the *Madonna delle Grazie e la Belleha* (il-Belliegha) area beneath the eastern part of the Citadel. The other twenty were diffused throughout the Gozitan countryside.

The largest settlement was that of *Xeuchia* (Xewkija) to the south east

with 403 persons. Close by to the south was Ta' Sannat with 173, under which are grouped Monsciar (Munxar), Xilendi (Xlendi), and Fontana grande (Fontana) with another 120. The settlements to the south west are grouped under Santa Chatarina (to the west of the present hamlet of Santa Luċġa) and include Dueira (Dwejra), Haijn Abdun (Ghajn Ghabdun), Gar Ilma (Ghar Ilma), and ta' Chircem (ta' Kerċem) with a total of 257. Further to the west was the settlement of Ta' Ciagi sive Dibegi maestrale (ta' Ċangura or ta' Dbiegi, now part of the village of San Lawrenz) with 53. The settlement in the west is aptly called Garbo (Gharb), Maltese for West, with 324 persons, the second largest settlement after Xewkija. To the north west there were Hasri (Ghasri) and Zebbug (Żebbuġ) with a total of 280. Between Ghasri and Rabat there was a settlement at Vet Sara (Wied Sara) with 92. To the north there was Marsailfurno (Marsalforn) with 55. The third largest settlement of Gozo was to the north east and known as Sciahret il Hazzenin (Xaghra) with 289. To the east was Nadur with 178 and la Cala (Qala) with 65. Finally there was the settlement at Mugiarrro (Mgarr) with 57 inhabitants. The community on the island of Comino was made up of 27; as a matter of fact there were more persons than when the census was taken, but they are not included as they were only there for a short time, it is noted (*ibid.*: 75v). The above order and nomenclature follow that in the original.

The census names all the places that more than three hundred years afterwards became villages and parishes, with one exception, Ghajnsielem. This shows that the pattern of settlements set between the late sixteenth and the beginning of the seventeenth century have remained almost unchanged.

A GLANCE AT THE POPULATION DISTRIBUTION

It is clear from this census that settlements had by then developed into the three-tiered pattern common to most medieval regions: the fortified city, its suburb, and the quasi-villages. In mid-1667, the population of Gozo and Comino consisted of 4168 persons living in 1113 households, that is an average of fewer than four persons per household. Of these 358 or 8.6% lived within the Citadel, 1200 or 28.8% in old Rabat, 237 or 5.7% on its outskirts, 2346 or 56.3% in the countryside, and 27 or 0.6% on the island of Comino.

These figures show that 43.1% of the Gozitans still lived within the Citadel or in its vicinity and in case of a sudden enemy landing they could recur for safety inside the fortifications within minutes of the raising of the alarm.

The élite of the population of Gozo had its residence within the Citadel. This included Fra Alessandro Fattinelli of Lucca, the 37 year old Governor of Gozo, and his Lieutenant, listed first in the census (*ibid*: 49r) Don Gioacchino Selon, the Provicar and many priests; two jurats, one of whom was also the judge and the other a notary; another notary; a doctor; the *Capomastro del Castello* and a *sargente*; a bombardier and several others. There were also a merchant, a butcher, a barber, and a sculptor. A confirmation of the existence of an affluent society within the Citadel is the fact that there were thirteen resident servants helping in the households (*ibid*: 49r-52v). The majority within the Citadel, as elsewhere, were of course common people.

As one expects, there is a reference to a larger number of occupations in Rabat and its outskirts, where there was a much heavier concentration of people (*ibid*: 77r-85r). There was a surgeon, a doctor, seven apothecaries, barbers, midwives, bakers, fishermen, tailors, shoemakers, carpenters, blacksmiths, masons, whitewashers, stevedores, and others. The largest group of the gainfully occupied living in Rabat — 129 of them — were engaged in gardening (*ibid*: 77r-85r). The *giardinaro*, gardener, worked in an irrigated, intensively tilled agricultural unit and specialized in the production of fruit and vegetables. At that time there was also a black woman without a surname (*ibid*: 77v) and two public prostitutes, one, a 24-year-old whose husband was in slavery (*ibid*: 54v), and the other, a 20-year-old Maltese living in Gozo (*ibid*: 55v).

In 1667, there were twenty-four priests, twenty-three of whom were within the limits of the *Matrice*, including Don Batholomeo Habela who lived on Comino (*ibid*: 75v). There were, besides, a deacon, six subdeacons, four unmarried clerics, ten married clerics and four nuns. One of the nuns probably helped in Saint Julian Hospital within the Citadel (*ibid*: 50r). An indication of the family background of some is interesting. The four Gozitan priests who became parish priests together in 1688 will be taken as an example. Don Lazzaro Cammilleri, the senior of the four by ordination, was the son of a *massaro*, a husbandman. Ordained in 1655,

he was probably living in Malta in 1667 for he is not included in the list, but his parents are (*ibid*: 69r). Don Bernardo Farmusa was the son of an *Alfiere della Cavalleria*, an ensign bearer (*ibid*: 67v). Don Bernardino Haber was the son of an old widower, and he lived within the Citadel (*ibid*: 52r); as did Francesco Vella, the son of a soldier, six years old at the time of the census (*ibid*: 52r).² All four were the sons of middle-class parents who could afford to pay for their education. It was probably not easy for a son of the lower classes to study for the priesthood.

From the census one can in fact gauge the difficult situation that many families were living in. Several wives had their husbands away; the reasons being *il marito in corso*, pirateering on the Order's galleys; *il marito schiavo*, in slavery; *il marito bonavoglia*, a rower on the galleys by choice; *il marito in Sicilia*, in Sicily, probably seeking work; *il marito fuggitivo*, having abandoned his wife; and *il marito forzato*, a rower on the galleys by punishment. One comes across a large number of heads of households described as *capo di casa povero*, the head of the household poor.

Gozo in 1667 was much different from that at the beginning of the century. From the census one can conclude that the centuries-old centre of activity on the island was by that time shifting slowly but steadily from the old Citadel to the fast developing suburb of Rabat. Besides, more than half (about 56.3% of the population) had moved from the centre to the surrounding countryside.

XEWKIJA — GOZO'S FIRST RAHAL

The fastest growing countryside community was that of Xewkija, with 403 inhabitants and 90 households in 1667 (*ibid*: 56r-59v). Two factors must have determined the choice of that area: it is a plateau with an expanse of fertile fields and it is under three kilometres from the Citadel, where one could recur for safety in less than an hour. It must have been one of the earliest communities to take root, as the already-mentioned reference to a regular Sunday mass before 1615 confirms.

A glance at the ninety households in 1667 provides a good idea of the

2. References in this paragraph were researched by Joe Muscat, Nadur.



The old Xewkija Parish Church, the seat of the first countryside parish in Gozo (1678). Photo: Francis Zammit Haber.

country settlements existing at that time (*ibid*: 56r - 59v). There were almost 4.5 persons per household, quite higher than the 3.7 overall average. The largest household was made up of twelve (*ibid*: 57v), and there was only one, a widow, living on her own (*ibid*: 59r). Of the ninety heads of households, 59 or 65% are described as *capo di casa povero*; 10 or 11% were headed by widows and could not have fared much better; 5 or 6% are undefined; and only 16 or 18% had permanent employment.

Those heads who were identified as *povero* or were widows, did not have a regular income — a staggering 76%. A large percentage of those scattered in the countryside fell in this category. These people were either *gabillotti*, tenants who worked in fields leased from the Government, the Church or the Maltese nobility, or labourers in the fields of others. They must have lived frugally during most of the year, and possibly next to starving during some months. The reason is that around three-fifths of their revenue was gobbled up in rent payments (Bezzina,

1985: 69). Besides, the fruit of their labour was dependent on many uncontrollable factors primarily amongst them the weather, disease and pests. Nonetheless there must have been more than one *povero* who had saved some money. Antonio Hagius, officially a *povero*, had in 1637 requested permission to build a house on a piece of rocky public land at Xewkija (NAG 1/4: 1636-37: 10r-v).

According to the census only sixteen heads or 18% had a regular income. Thirteen of them were *massaro*, that is a husbandman, an owner or custodian of a farm with labourers and a certain quantity of cattle. The others were a *ferraio*, a blacksmith; a *muratore*, a mason; and a *putere*, possibly from Sicilian *putè*, a pork-butcher. The *ferraio* must have fared quite well, for his was the most numerous family in the Xewkija district: at the age of 51 and with a wife of 40, he had ten living children whose ages ranged from 23 to four years (Census, 1667: 57v).

The settlement of the Xewkija district had grown steadily over the years and its centre had by the passage of years shifted from the already mentioned *tal-Hamrija* area to another locality. Yet, as before, the dwellings had grown around a chapel, one dedicated to Saint John the Baptist. By 1678, the Assumption chapel had been dilapidated for some years (AEGVP, 1657: 17r) as the people of the settlement had turned their attention and care to the chapel of Saint John (AEGVP, 1678:89v).

However though the community continued to grow steadily, it was not an autonomous *rahal*, as it still formed part of the *Matrice* parish. The people scattered throughout the countryside were now closer to their places of work and enjoyed more spacious housing, but they were far removed from their parish church. It took quite a long time for the ecclesiastical authorities to recognize the new situation in seventeenth century Gozo – another reason that must have slowed down the formation of villages.

This hesitation by the church to come to terms with the changing pattern is due to two factors. Gozo was at the time far removed from the centre of ecclesiastical authority, the bishop, who resided far away in Valletta and very rarely travelled to Gozo. Truly enough he was represented on the island by a Provicar, but the bishop was not himself in touch with the people. Besides, current canon law required the fulfilment of four conditions before a parish could be established, and it was not easy to

fulfil them all. There had to be a *causa iusta*, a just pastoral reason; a *locus congruus*, a worthy place for worship; the *consensus Parochi*, that is the bishop had to hear the opinion of the parish priest from whose territory the parish was going to be dismembered, though eventually he could proceed without it; and, finally, a *dos congrua*, the bishop had to find some income for the subsistence of the new parish priest.

Bishop Michael de Molina came face to face with the growing countryside communities during his pastoral visit to Gozo between 18 and 27 November 1678. (AEGVP 1678: 55r.105v). Four public-spirited residents of the *contrada* of Xewkija, Giovanni Maria Azzoppardo, Giovanni Maria Mercieca, Domenico Xuereb and Giovanni Maria Pisano, grasped the occasion to present a petition to the bishop in which they emphasized the changes that had taken place in the population distribution (*ibid*: 102r). They claimed that the *contrada* residents had by then risen to 650. Enlightened by whoever was directing them of the conditions that had to be fulfilled for the establishment of a parish, they promised the bishop that they would guarantee two *tari* every year from ever household for the parish priest as well as to amass a capital to guarantee an annual income for the parish church.

A note on the people's income is apt at this point. The above mentioned school master Chaber was, at the height of his career, receiving 30 *Scudi* annually (NAG 1/4 1636-37: 16r; 1637-38: 26v; 1641-42: 117v.20v.27v) — which sum can be considered an income in the higher bracket. Thus two and a half *Scudi* or 30 *Tari* per month — 21 cents in present currency — must have been enough for an individual with a dependent or two to achieve a good standard of living. Most people never earned that much, but as most were engaged in husbandry they had a large measure of self-sufficiency and some must have fared quite well.

Bishop de Molina judged the establishment of the district of Xewkija into a separate parish an extremely urgent matter and the offer of the residents for their parish priest sufficient. On the last day of his visit, on 27 November 1678, he issued the decree *Habita matura consideratione* establishing Xewkija the first parish of the countryside (AEGVP 1678:1105r-v). Xewkija became also the first *official* village of Gozo.

THE NEXT FIVE VILLAGES

It was a matter of time before the larger communities would claim the dismemberment of their district from the *Matrice*. Within a few months Bishop de Molina acted again. On 29 August 1679, he established the parish of Gharb (ACM, Misc. 11: 229r-v), which, according to the 1667 census, was the second largest settlement.³ As in Xewkija, the centre of the district was also shifting slowly from an area at *Birbuba* to higher grounds known as *tal-Blata*. This shifting must have been dictated by a rising population in search of more space. It is also worth noting that the first two villages were one to the east and another to the west of Gozo.

Other parish establishments would have followed suit were it not for the transfer of the bishop from Malta in May 1682. Bishop David Cocco Palmeri, his successor, was elected on 15 May of two years later. He paid his first visit to Gozo between 20 April and 5 May 1687 (AAM, 1687B: 603v) — a visit of paramount importance for the consolidation of the village units on the island. During his rather long stay he had ample time to tour the whole island and get first-hand information on the pastoral situation of the countryside settlements. Fully conscious of their precarious spiritual situation, he would have acted there and then were it not for some obstacles in fulfilling the aforementioned conditions. However by the end of his visit, he had circumscribed the districts that were shortly to be established parishes (*ibid*).

On 28 April 1688, after having overcome all difficulties, he issued the decree *Cum in prima* establishing four more countryside parishes: ta' Sannat, Xaghra, Qala-Nadur, and Żebbuġ (AAM, Benefica, 1685-1711, 96v-102v). According to the 1667 census those were the next most populated districts of the island. These six villages of Gozo comprised the majority of the twenty countryside districts enumerated in 1667. Xewkija was by itself; but Gharb included the districts of Dwejra and ta' Ċangura; ta' Sannat included Munxar and Xlendi; Xaghra included Marsalforn; Nadur and Qala included Mġarr, together with the island of Comino; and Żebbuġ included Ghasri. The other districts, Fontana, Santa Chatarina, Ghajn Ghabdun, Ghar Ilma, ta' Kerċem, and Wied Sara remained within the *Matrice* parish.

3. The decree is entitled *Habita matura consideratione*, like that of Xewkija.

DISTINCTIVENESS

The villages of Gozo have a distinctive character of their own for they developed at a later period from those of Malta and their shape was formed by different historical influences.

As already pointed out, it is certain that before 1551, Gozo had a number of rural settlements just like Malta but much smaller. This can be inferred from the wide scatter of pre-1551 chapels as well as from references gleaned from wills and other notarial acts. Had they been left undisturbed, the nuclei of the larger settlements would have gone on growing at the expense of the smaller. Yet after the traumatic experience of 1551, those that survived chose initially the protection of the old fortified *Castello*.

Rural settlements began developing again before the end of the century. It is certain that some people returned to the former settlements, for quite a number are recorded in pre-1551 documents (Wettinger 1980: 173-198). Yet they were fewer in number, for people preferred to converge on one area. The bigger the settlement, the safer was the place to live in, as collective defence could be better organized. Besides, it offered a greater number of commercial services to the smaller farmer together with a richer social and religious life.

They also differ in form and have a different layout from those of Malta. In Malta the most determinant form was fear and so the villages are tight, compact, defensive warrens with narrow streets. In Gozo the villages developed after the fear of raiding had been partly lifted and so there are broader streets and straggling open plans.

The set-up with six villages was to remain unaltered for almost two hundred years. This is due to two factors. Emigration was negligible and few people married and settled outside the confines of their villages. So much so that until not many years ago, some surnames clearly indicated one's roots. A *Sultana* almost certainly hailed from Xaghra, and a *Mintoff* from Ghasri. This is also the reason why in each village a good number of families were related to each other. Due to this, the growth of the villages is very proportional to the original number of settlers.

Table 2
Population in Gozitan Villages: 1607 – 1797

Village	1678	1695	1702	1705	1716	1726	1728	1781	1784	1797
Rabat-Matrice	3045		2603	2942		1750	1891	3304	3059	
Rabat-St George					1523	1598	1640	1893	1933	
Xewkija			643	640	688		794	761	1432	1250
Gharb			520		518	492	443		1490	1516
Sannat			377	385	426	384	492		738	830
Xaghra		409	652	698	670	770		1341	1340	1547
Nadur		410	470		643	759	843	1927	2033	2100
Żebbuġ		359	392		381	403	399		784	786

Source: AAM, *Status Animarum*, researched by Stanley Fiorini

With the passage of years more and more people married and settled outside their villages and some areas developed faster than others. Table 2 gives an idea of how the villages grew throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth century, that is up to the end of the rule of the Knights of Saint John (Fiorini 1980-83: 325-344).

SEVEN MORE VILLAGES

In 1800 Malta and Gozo passed under British rule. The population, after an initial decline, began rising again, and the ecclesiastical authorities soon felt the need to establish other parishes: the first was Ghajnsielem, the unmentioned unit in 1667. Established on 1 April 1855, it lies close to Mgarr harbour, which by that time had developed into the busiest port of Gozo. In 1667, the few inhabitants of the area lived close to the harbour. As the number of people in the port increased, they began moving to the nearest open space, giving rise to this village. Qala, already well established in 1688, became a separate parish in 1872.

Ta' Kerċem, established as a parish in 1885, is an exception to this trend. In 1667 the population was centred in the Santa Chatarina area. With the passage of years, due probably to remoteness, the people shifted closer to the centre of the island, thus giving rise to the village of Kerċem, the closest to the town. The former settlement ceased to exist altogether.

The people at ta' Ċangura moved towards a chapel dedicated to Saint

Table 3
Census Data for Gozitan Village Population: 1807 to 1985

	1807	1842	1861	1881	1901	1921	1931	1948	1957	1967	1985
Citadel+Rabat ^a	5100	4904	5062	5820	5057	5219	5531	6175	6357	5462	5968
Xewkija	1364	1361	1345	1469	1762	2314	2470	3079	3281	2999	2772
Gharb ^b	1459	1413	1447	1630	1092	1402	1398	1555	1269	1117	983
Sannat ^c	869	899	940	986	1116	1228	1324	1625	1656	1297	1309
Xaghra	1469	1720	2010	2288	2562	3262	3522	4759	4056	3517	3202
Nadur ^d	1800	3295	3046	3548	2948	3460	3354	3465	4136	3694	3482
Zebbuġ ^e	769	720	667	910	767	1006	1010	1261	1199	1166	1182
Ghajnsielem/Comino			942	1002	1333	1250	1449	1878	1860	1755	1809
Qala					1219	1340	1601	1569	1616	1522	1369
Kerċem/Santa Luċija					1037	1143	1212	1307	1272	1251	1411
San Lawrenz					643	528	499	413	428	511	517
Fontana										893	836
Ghasri					467	409	467	594	471	374	335
Munxar										420	507

^a including both the *Matrice* and Saint George parish; as well as Fontana up to 1957.

^b including San Lawrenz up to 1881.

^c including Munxar up to 1957.

^d including Ghajnsielem/Comino up to 1842; as well as Qala up to 1881.

^e including part of Ghasri up to 1881.

Source: Census of Malta and Gozo for relative years.

Laurence, giving rise to San Lawrenz, formally recognized as a separate parish and village in 1893. A suburb of the suburb Rabat, Fontana, inhabited for centuries, became a separate parish in 1911. The spring that gave it its name must have been instrumental in attracting people to this prohibitive area. The next village to be established was Ghasri in 1921, and the last Munxar in 1957. These last two remain the smallest villages on the island.

A glance at the census data, shown in Table 3, demonstrates how the villages continued to grow during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

THE PROCESS OF CONSOLIDATION

The process that set in motion the leading people of each community to seek the establishment of their settlement into an autonomous parish

gained momentum once their wish was acceded to. The parish church sited in the geographical centre of the village also became the centre for its further consolidation.

This sense of belonging to an autonomous unit was very much alive. Without it one cannot explain how a handful of households were able to embark on the building of a large parish church. This happened in all six villages established in the eighteenth century. The people united their efforts and the little means that they could set apart, to build a new church. All able persons, males and females, offered a helping hand in the actual construction. The building of a new parish church at ta' Sannat initiated within less than a decade of the foundation of the parish (AAM, 1699: 488r; Bezzina 1989) was an enterprise far beyond the means of the about sixty households in the new unit. Nonetheless they ventured ahead and the new church was raised within a score of years (AAM, 1723: 639v; Bezzina, 1989).

These building enterprises had become possible as the economy of the island had by then begun a slow revival. The production of vegetables and fruit which found a ready sale in Malta was rising steadily as was the size and efficiency of Gozo's irrigated areas (Agius De Soldanis 1746: 150-158). The cotton industry began taking a major place in the rural economy (Bezzina 1985: 204-297). Finally the expenditure of the Knights on the repairs and the building of new fortifications increased the money in circulation. Thus when 4281 *Scudi* were spent on the works undertaken as a result of the general alarm of 1714-15 (Hoppen 1979:124), one immediately notices an increase in the contributions of the parishioners (AAM, 1723: 638r-640r; Bezzina 1989:204-207). The economic revival is very clearly reflected from parish accounts.

When construction work on the new parish churches was concluded, the villagers turned their attention to internal decorations. The acquisition of any prestigious possession in the nearby parish was enough to goad the people to go out of their way to acquire something better for their own. This sense of rivalry with the nearby villages was a major factor not only in the raising of the beautiful churches of Gozo but also in creating a united village where internal divisions, in contrast with Malta, are negligible.

The foundation of two or more confraternities within each parish, one cause of the internal divisions on the sister island, led to the acquisition of more works of art and other furnishings (Bezzina 1989: 194-197). The confraternities, besides fulfilling specific religious obligations, also helped in the process of consolidation on a social level. It was their regular meetings that taught the mostly illiterate people to organize themselves and to see to other needs of their community beyond those spiritual.

The parish confraternities eventually united their efforts to organize the parish *festa* — the pride of every Gozitan village to this day. The *festa* was a very small affair in the beginning, a sung mass and the distribution of something special like wheaten bread or imported wine to the poor. The economic revival led to the enhancement of the village *festa* with four subsequent elements: the organization of a procession, the illumination by firewood and oil lamps, the firing of mortars, and the participation of a brass band. These enhancements are first recorded from the early eighteenth century in relation to the mid-August festivity of Santa Marija celebrated in the *Matrice* (Bezzina 1985: 135-143). Yet they were soon emulated by the villages, even by small ta' Sannat, where by 1749 the feast of Saint Margaret was quite an event (Bezzina 1989: 245-246).

The nineteenth century saw the addition of another very important element — the acquisition of a statue of the patron saint, the first being that of Saint George in Rabat in 1839, followed by the village of Xewkija in 1845. The parading of the statue through the village streets brought the *festa* to a climax. These elements are the basis of the village *festa* to this day — a *festa* that even on the threshold of the twenty-first century still has the power to consolidate the villagers living in the village, elsewhere on the islands, or abroad.

The band-clubs came to the foreground in the second half of the nineteenth century with the formation of two well-organized clubs in Rabat (Grech 1988). They were soon invited to offer the services in the villages and, it often happened, that closely lying villages brought a different band. Thus if Gharb brought one band, the village of San Lawrenz which was dismembered from Gharb, brought the other. The two band clubs, one might say, divided the island of Gozo into two factions. This situation was partly diffused with the formation of other bands in the larger villages, but the rivalry persists to this day. The summer festivities could

never be organized on such a grand scale on a tiny island as Gozo without this healthy rivalry.

CONCLUSION

The ecclesiastical establishment continued to play a major role in the development and consolidation of the Gozitan villages well into the twentieth century. Then another entity developed in the same direction — the local Council. Formally established on 14 April 1961, the Gozo Civic Council, with one representative from each village, was a statutory local Government responsible for local affairs. The Councillors, fired with zeal for their villages, did their utmost to initiate projects for the benefit of the villagers that had elected them. As a result, meetings were sometimes dominated by parochialism. Nevertheless, on the whole, the Council did a lot to improve the environment, and its abolition on 4 December 1973 was a loss to the island.

Local Councils were established again between 1993 and 1994. Slowly but surely, the leading role in the further consolidation of the village unit is shifting from the church and the local band club or *festa* committee to the Council. This is happening as the Council is a legal entity with clearly set objectives and wider interests. This will slowly help to diversify the interest of the villagers beyond the church and the *festa* to such fields as the general upkeep of the village, the better appreciation of its cultural heritage and the promotion of local talent.

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